

# Advanced Punctuation: Semicolons, Colons, Quotation Marks, Dashes, Parentheses and Apostrophes

## The Semicolon (;)

Like a comma, a semicolon (;) tells the reader to pause. However, the semicolon is a stronger mark of punctuation. It separates clauses and phrases that are closely related or that receive the same emphasis.

NOTE: Unlike periods, question marks, and exclamation points, semicolons always appear within, not at the end of, sentences.

### The Semicolon Between Independent (Main) Clauses

Use a semicolon to connect two independent clauses that are closely related and are not connected with a coordinating conjunction. An independent clause has a subject and

a verb and expresses a complete idea. The coordinating conjunctions are and, or, but, nor, for, so, yet.

Woodrow Wilson was the 28th president of the United States; he followed William Howard Taft.

NOTE: Don't capitalize a word that follows a semicolon unless it is a proper noun.

Guadeloupe is in the Leeward Islands; Guatemala is in Central America.

### The Semicolon Between Independent (Main) Clauses Joined by Transitional Words and Phrases

In the middle of sentences, transitions come in two forms: conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases. Both emphasize and clarify the relationship between the independent clauses they join.

Conjunctive Adverb:

It's a good thing Columbus came to America; otherwise, the Italians would never have learned about the tomato.

Transitional Phrase:

People before Columbus knew the world wasn't flat; in fact, Eratosthenes accurately measured the earth's circumference in the third century B.C.

NOTE: Use a comma after a conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase.

### The Semicolon Between a Series of Items that Contain Commas

Use semicolons to separate items in a series when some or all of the items in that series contain commas.

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) was the daughter of William X, duke of Aquitaine; the wife of Louis VII, king of France; and later the wife of Henry of Normandy, who became Henry II of England.

There are three items in this list: (1) the daughter of . . . ; (2) the wife of . . . ; and (3) later the wife of . . . . If the semicolons were replaced by commas, readers might not be able to tell where one item ends and the next begins. After all, each item already contains a comma of its own.

## The Colon (:)

A colon (:) is a mark of punctuation that appears within a sentence. Never use a colon at the end of a sentence.

### The Colon Between Independent (Main) Clauses

Sometimes, you can use an independent clause to explain, add to, or clarify the meaning of another. You should separate these clauses with a colon.

Stephen King has been busy: he has written more than 27 novels since 1974.

#### The Colon After an Independent Clause to Introduce Information

You can place a colon after an independent clause to introduce information naming something in that clause.

Alaska is rich in several natural resources: oil, gold, copper, and uranium.  
Only one city is called "eternal": Rome.

#### The Colon to Introduce Direct Quotations

You can use a colon to introduce a direct quotation.

The prisoner pleaded with his accusers: "I am innocent. Innocent, I tell you!"

CAUTION: Don't use a colon to introduce a direct quotation if that quotation is needed to make the sentence you're writing complete.

Not: Pope wrote that: "to err is human."  
But: Pope wrote that "to err is human."

#### The Colon for Other Purposes

In the salutation of a business letter: Dear Professor Johnson:  
To separate hours and minutes: 10:55 P.M.  
Before a subtitle: Thomas More: A Biography

CAUTION: Do not use a colon to separate objects or complements from verbs. A direct object is the receiver of an action. A complement comes after the verb and describes the subject.

Object

Not: She bought: a saw, a hammer, and a drill.  
But: She bought a saw, a hammer, and a drill.

Complement

Not: He is: a good speller but a bad typist.  
But: He is a good speller but a bad typist.

#### **The Quotation Mark (" ")**

Quotation marks (" ") identify words you have taken directly from someone else. They tell readers these words are exactly as your source spoke or wrote them.

"We don't know a millionth of one percent about anything," said Thomas Alva Edison.  
"Toots Shor's restaurant," claims Yogi Berra, "is so crowded nobody goes there anymore."

CAUTION: Don't put quotation marks around an indirect quotation, which tells what someone said without using his or her exact words.

Not: She said that "she was going to the party."  
But: She said that she was going to the party.

NOTE: Quotation marks are always used in pairs.

#### Quotations Within Quotations

Use single quotation marks around a quotation within a quotation.

Benita said, "I told Julio, 'Don't swing on that branch,' but he ignored me and told me to 'get lost.'"

[The writer quotes Benita, who is quoting herself and Julio. "Don't swing on that branch" and "get lost" are quotations within a quotation.]

#### Quotation Marks with Other Marks of Punctuation

Commas and periods appear inside quotation marks.

When I asked what he wanted, he calmly said, "Money."

Colons and semicolons appear outside quotation marks.

"He who hesitates is not only lost but miles away from the nearest exit"; now that's the kind of line stand-up comics dream about.

#### Quotation Marks Around Titles

Use quotation marks around titles of newspaper, magazine, and journal articles; poems; short stories; songs; and episodes of TV programs.

B. R. Jerman's article, "Browning's Witless Duke," is about Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess."

The story "Guests of the Nation" is set in Ireland.

Gershwin's "Summertime" and "I Got Rhythm" are classics of American song.

"Who Shot J.R.?" was the most watched episode of Dallas.

#### **The Dash (—)**

You can create a dash (—) by typing two hyphens (- -) with no space in between (—).

##### Setting Off Material that Needs Emphasis

George Bush became the first incumbent vice president—since 1836—to win election to the presidency. [The phrase since 1836 is being emphasized.]

##### Helping to Clarify an Idea

In 1989, President Bush responded effectively to the upheaval in Eastern Europe—by offering economic aid to Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia and by lending his support to the reunification of Germany.

NOTE: The more formal colon can replace the dash.

##### Separating a List From an Independent Clause

The strengthening of the Western alliance, the Persian Gulf War, and the signing of several arms reduction treaties with the Soviet Union—these were the great successes of President Bush's foreign policy.

NOTE: A dash can come before or after an independent clause.

#### **The Parentheses [( )]**

Parentheses [( )] enclose important words that would interrupt the flow of the sentence. Parentheses are always used in pairs.

##### Setting Off an Explanatory Sentence

Ishmael (he is the speaker in Melville's *Moby Dick*) takes his name from a biblical character who was cast into the desert. [In this case, the words within parentheses form a complete sentence.]

##### Setting Off Words that Specify

Five countries (Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti) border Ethiopia. [Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti name the five countries.]

### Enclosing Brief Definitions

The Egyptians practiced embalming (the preservation of a corpse through chemical treatment).

### Enclosing Numbers or Letters that Mark Items in a List

Before becoming president, George Bush was (1) a member of the House of Representatives, (2) U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, (3) chief liaison officer to China, (4) director of the CIA, and (5) vice president.

## **The Apostrophe (')**

An apostrophe (') shows possession:

the child's toy the film's star  
the teacher's desk the store's prices  
the city's drug problem  
the dog's tail

You can also use apostrophes to create special relationships between words: a night's sleep, two months' pay.

### The Seven Uses of Apostrophes

1. Use the apostrophe to show possession; add -'s to a singular noun.

Monrovia, Liberia's capital, was named after U.S. president James Monroe.

Add -'s to a singular noun that ends in -s or -z, as long as doing so does not make the pronunciation of that noun awkward. If doing so creates awkwardness, add only the apostrophe.

Jazz's origins go back to Afro-American spirituals.  
BUT  
Jesus' teachings can be found in the New Testament.

2. Use the apostrophe to show possession; add only -' if the noun is plural and ends in /-s.

The two countries' borders were in dispute.

3. Use the apostrophe to show joint possession in a series; add -'s only to the last noun.

Groucho, Chico, and Harpo's films are still funny.

4. Use the apostrophe to show individual possession in a series; add -'s to each noun.

Boston's and San Francisco's waterfronts are interesting, but I prefer Seattle's.

5. Use the apostrophe in contractions in place of omitted numbers or letters.

She will graduate with the class of '99.  
Because it's raining, we can't go to the park.

CAUTION: It's = it is; can't = cannot.

6. Use the apostrophe to form the possessive of a hyphenated word; add -'s after the last letter.

Not: My mother-in-laws home  
Not: My mother's-in-law home  
But: My mother-in-law 's home

7. Add an apostrophe to abbreviations and letters and numbers to make them plural.

Syed received three A's and two B's as final grades.  
Three 747's sat on the runway.

CAUTION: In general, do not use an apostrophe to form plurals.

Not: Hitler planned to conquer the nation's of Europe.  
But: Hitler planned to conquer the nations of Europe.

CAUTION: Do not add an apostrophe to a pronoun that is already possessive.

Not: Under Hitler, Germany sought it's place in the sun.  
But: Under Hitler, Germany sought its place in the sun.

(Adapted from *Writing Intensive: Essentials for College Writers* (2007) by Elaine P. Maimon & Janice H. Peritz)